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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a study designed to investigate how white college students' naive beliefs about affirmative action admission policies might negatively influence the likelihood of their interacting with their black student peers. It was noted that many institutions are not open about exactly how their affirmative action admissions policies work with the consequence that white students do not understand and make incorrect assumptions about how affirmative action students were admitted. Using a program of experimental research for testing variants of the social distance hypothesis, two studies were carried out. The first study measured white students' beliefs about student racial ambivalence and found that students who believed that affirmative action students were underqualified showed reluctance to associate with black students. In the second experiment students were organized by levels of racial ambivalence and by beliefs about beneficiaries' qualifications with results showing that white students chose to associate with black students more if they believed that they were qualified. Overall, the findings indicated that the formation of informal groups was influenced by procedure-based beliefs about the extent to which affirmative action leads to the selection of qualified or unqualified black students. Included are 4 tables and 29 references. (JB)

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Affirmative Action and the Formation of Informal Interracial
Groups on the College Campus:
Report to the Spencer Foundation

Reporting Period: August, 1990 - July, 1991

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Somewhere along the way, colleges and universities began to play a game with their affirmative action policies. Rather than reveal the procedures through which their affirmative action admissions policies were implemented, many institutions of higher education began to play a game of "we hide, you seek" (Bunzel, 1988). Whatever the reasons for this "strategy," the failure to discuss affirmative action in concrete procedural terms has set the foundation for the failure of affirmative action in higher education. If these policies are to do more than temporarily increase the numbers of black students attending predominantly white institutions, then the absence of discussion is clearly a mistake. How so?

From August, 1990 to July, 1991, we have been investigating how white college students' naive beliefs about affirmative action might influence the likelihood of their interacting with their black student peers. This report describes the rationale for and the results of a set of experiments designed to investigate the conditions under which white students uninformed beliefs about affirmative action may cause negative social behaviors toward black students.

In preview, a causal modeling of students beliefs about affirmative action shows that white students' naive conceptions of the procedures of affirmative action determine, in part, the extent to which they believe that black students admitted through affirmative action will be qualified. In addition, a set of experimental studies show that alone or in conjunction with racial attitudes, white students beliefs about the effect of affirmative action admissions on the qualifications of black students do influence white students' willingness to include black students in informal groups.

Since beliefs about the effect of affirmative action admissions on the qualifications of black students are determined, in part, by naive conceptions of procedures, we argue first that these negative social behaviors are due to a lack of openness about affirmative action procedures. Second, we argue that these negative social behaviors are detrimental to the full integration of black students into the environments of predominantly white colleges and universities. That is the case since the social behaviors affected are of a type, (1) which affects the emotional-integration of black students into the life of the institution, and (2) which affects the informational-integration of black students into the life of the institution. Each form of integration should bear directly on black students' persistence.

Affirmative Action In Higher Education

More Than Numbers: The Intent of Affirmative Action

Behind the call for affirmative action in higher education there has always been an implicit theory that affirmative action would increase the operation of social psychological forces which would lead to the creation of new (interracial and mixed-gendered) social networks; transforming and ending the domination of the "old boys" network. When affirmative action is viewed in this way, as a means to both material and social psychological ends, in addition to analyzing the material effects on representation and income (e.g., Shulman & Darity, 1989), it is necessary to analyze the conditions under which these policies can be expected to have the anticipated social psychological effects (Barnes Nacoste, in press).

What We Had In Mind: The Implicit Social Psychological Theory

For affirmative action in higher education, what we had in mind was increasing the presence of blacks, and members of other racial groups, as students on predominantly white campuses. We also had in mind that this increased representation of black students would provide those students with educational and social resources that were previously unavailable to them. We had in mind too, that this increased representation of black students would, in the long run, add a little color to the social networks through which power and influence are channelled in our society.

Few were blindly naive about this. We understood that these effects would depend on the reduction of prejudice and racism in higher education (and the society at large). Still, we had in mind that affirmative action would be a force in the elimination of the influence of racial prejudice that has excluded blacks (and other racial groups) from important social networks.

The expectation that social networks would be influenced by affirmative action rested on an implicit theory of the social psychology of intergroup contact made possible through policies of affirmative action (Braddock, 1985). Supporting that implicit theory there is now evidence that intergroup contact does change social networks and the extent to which the operation of those networks benefits blacks. Braddock & McPartland (1987) have shown, for example, that blacks who attend desegregated colleges and universities benefit when, as is typical, a search to fill a job opening relies heavily on social networks.

Although impressive, that evidence does not tell us about the microsocial dynamics which shaped the creation of such an interracial social network. One would imagine that certain patterns of social interaction are prerequisite to the existence of such a network. Simple desegregation and contact would not be enough. Once in contact, individual students would have to be

willing to, and actually engage in meaningful cross-racial interactions. There would have to be, in other words, a certain amount of social acceptance in the context provided by the affirmative action created desegregation (see Pettigrew, 1968 for the distinction between "desegregated" and "integrated" schools).

But what if there are questions about the means through which these interactions are made possible? What if those questions not only reduce the likelihood that interracial social networks will develop but actually increases the likelihood that they will not? Among the mostly positive expectations for affirmative action policies, we did not have in mind that the idea of affirmative action might itself become a force in keeping black students out of the very social networks these policies were expected to open.

A Formal Theory of the Psychology of Affirmative Action

Today, although not new, controversy about affirmative action in higher education is very salient (D'Souza, 1991; Witt, 1990). It would be naive then to think that white students (and faculty) have not been influenced by the controversy. Yet generally speaking, administrators of most universities do not seem willing to discuss in concrete terms the procedures used to enact the policies (Hacker, 1989). That may be a fatal mistake since social psychological theories of procedural justice make it clear that "closed" or "hidden" procedures are likely to be automatically perceived as unjust (Leventhal, 1980; Lind & Tyler, 1988). As would be predicted from those theories, a significant number of white students not only question the justice of affirmative action, but its consequences. For example, in the student newspaper at a major university, one white student wrote:

Many white students are suspicious of black students because they feel that blacks had an advantage in getting accepted. If the standards for admission of blacks are lower than the standards for whites, then will the white student body not consider the black student body as intellectually inferior? Of course they will and do. (Pearce, 1988).

What do these kinds of sentiments have to do with the potential effects of affirmative action on participation by black students in the interracial social networks on predominantly white campuses? One strong possibility is that white students beliefs and feelings about affirmative might reduce the probability of black student participation in those networks. To understand that hypothesis fully, we need to understand at least the outlines of the social psychology of affirmative action.

Evaluations of the justness or fairness of affirmative action policies appear to be determined by the procedures used to implement these policies. Putting it simply, people are concerned

about how affirmative action mandates are translated into concrete actions. The question is: "In what way will "normal" selection processes have to be changed to comply with affirmative action mandates?" That question about affirmative action procedures, however, is not a question used to single out affirmative action. Indeed, there is a great deal of evidence which shows that whenever scarce resources are to be distributed, people become concerned about the nature of the procedures that will be used to allocate those resources (Lind & Tyler, 1988).

In that context, Barnes Nacoste (1990a) argues that affirmative action procedures have powerful psychological effects because of the pattern of interdependence the procedures create between individuals who are competing (or anticipating competing) for the same outcome. Most relevant to this interdependence is the use of universalistic (e.g. high school grades) and particularistic selection criteria (e.g. group membership) as the bases for distributing outcomes like jobs and college admissions. Through the relative weights placed on these criteria, affirmative action specifies the structure of the competition for scarce resources between individuals who are members of particular groups (e.g. blacks vs whites). So that based on how the use of group membership as a decision criterion is managed, the procedure specifies whether competitors from group A as compared to those from group B receive an a priori worse, equal or better chance of having their claims affect the decisionmaking in their favor.

Of course, the configurations of weights that could be placed on universalistic vs particularistic decision criteria exists on a continuum. What appears to matter most to people is which of these is given the most weight, universalistic or particularistic criteria. Affirmative action procedures which give more weight to universalistic criteria are perceived as fairer than those which give more weight to a particularistic criterion. Moreover, in a variety of contexts, looking at the responses of both beneficiaries and nonbeneficiaries of these policies, procedures have been found to have a profound influence on social psychological responses to affirmative action (see, Barnes Nacoste, 1990b).

Our work builds on this procedural justice conceptualization and other models of responses to affirmative action (e.g. Kinder & Sanders, 1990; Kluegel & Smith, 1983; Tougas & Veillieux, 1989). Guiding the work we are reporting here is our claim that evaluations of the fairness of affirmative action are, in part, determined by conceptions of the policy procedure and beliefs about the consequences of that procedure.

To investigate that hypothesis, we analyzed questionnaire data collected between (August, 1989-July, 1990. From the structural equation modeling of those data (Barnes Nacoste & Powell, 1991), we learned, (1) that white students evaluations of the procedures of affirmative action influence their beliefs about the consequence of these policies for the qualifications of beneficiaries and (2) that a white student's belief about the qualifications of beneficiaries is one of the direct predictors of perceived fairness. Those patterns were strongly supportive of the hypothesis.

Effects of Affirmative Action On the Formation of Informal Groups

Procedure-based beliefs about the qualifications of beneficiaries of affirmative action should not be taken lightly. What would you think about having to interact with someone who you felt was likely to be unqualified? Being like the rest of us, their beliefs about the qualifications of beneficiaries of affirmative action should influence white students willingness to interact with black students. That should be the case especially where blacks are the group to which the targeting of these policies is most salient. Under those circumstances, members of the group with questionable qualifications are visibly identifiable, and thus can be easily avoided.

Following a more formal line of reasoning, we have been investigating whether, and under what circumstances, beliefs about affirmative action procedures will influence the likelihood of white students' willingness to include black students in an informal group. We have been investigating an "affirmative action social distance hypothesis," which is that:

The belief that college and university affirmative action admissions procedures will lead to the admission of unqualified black students will cause white students to distance themselves from social interactions with black students.

Method

We have developed a program of experimental research for testing variants of the social distance hypothesis. Four experiments have been conducted. Two of these studies provide the most coherent picture of what we have learned. In those two studies, we have used the same methodology.

First, we measured white students beliefs about the university's affirmative action admissions procedures. For both experiments we categorized students as believing that university affirmative action procedures lead to the selection of qualified or unqualified black students. Second, some 4 to 8 weeks later,

from among those pre-categorized, we randomly selected and recalled students to participate in an experiment on "learning through listening."

In both experiments, we manipulated the racial mix of the students reporting for the experiment. In some conditions, the group of five students reporting were all white. In some conditions, the group of five students were all white except for one black student. Where the black student was present, that student was an experimental confederate who had been pre-rated as being perceived as typical of black students on the campus.

When students reported for the experiment, they were led to believe that they were going to be asked to work on a complex cognitive problem solving task. After listening to the task instructions and taking notes, the students went to a private cubicle where they were to review their notes in preparation for doing the task. At this point, we introduced some information that made it plausible to ask individual participants to choose from among the other participants those whom they would like to be a part of a group in which the participant would be a member. Within this context, we manipulated the type of group for which participants were choosing the others. Participants chose either, (1) who they wanted to have in a group that was to help them to prepare for a test on the task instructions (study group), or (2) who they wanted to take a fifteen minute break with before working on the task individually (study-break group).

Not accounted for within all of this is the important variable of racial attitude of participants. At a simple and intuitive level, some would argue that racial attitude itself might be the major variable. Simple models do not work, however, because expressed racial attitudes have changed (Moe, Nacoste & Insko, 1981; Schuman, Steeh & Bobo, 1985). That change has caused a great deal of controversy about how best to conceptualize the contemporary racial attitudes of white Americans (Devine, Monteith, Zuwerink, & Elliot, 1991; Dovidio & Gaertner, 1986; Katz, 1991; Sniderman, Piazza, Tetlock & Kendrick, 1991). Still, within this controversy there is a consensus that the contemporary racial attitudes of whites are now ambivalent where before those attitudes were mostly negative. Ambivalence in racial attitudes is important since the dynamic associated with contemporary racial attitudes would be more subtle, and influence behavior indirectly through factors which serve as filters. That hypothesis has received some empirical support (Hass, Katz, Rizzo, Bailey & Eisenstadt, 1991).

With that in mind we took account of racial attitude with measures of racial ambivalence. Our measures of racial ambivalence are based on the idea that individuals can reasonably report on the extent to which he or she has positive or negative feelings toward blacks as a group. We used participants' self

reports of the predominant valence of their feelings towards blacks as a group as the basic operationalization of racial ambivalence. However, the specific operationalization differed slightly between the two experiments. For experiment one, we used subjects self reports of whether they had mostly negative, mostly positive, or equally negative and positive (ambivalent) feelings toward blacks as a group. For experiment two we used a more sophisticated approach. On separate questionnaire items subjects reported on the extent to which they had positive feelings and the extent to which they had negative feelings. Responses from those items were then used to construct a quantitative measure of racial ambivalence.

Results

In analyzing the results of experiment 1, we included racial ambivalence as an analytic factor after the running of the experiment. As can be seen in table 1, choice of the black confederate was affected by the combination of beliefs about the qualifications and the type of group being constructed. First we found that white students who believed that beneficiaries are generally qualified showed no differential preference for, or aversion to, the including the black confederate. In contrast, white students who believed that beneficiaries are generally unqualified, showed more reluctance to include the black confederate when the group being formed was a study-break group as opposed to a study-group. Having established that pattern, we conducted an analysis in which we controlled for subjects' levels of racial ambivalence. Even then the initial pattern remained unchanged.

Insert Table 1 about here

For experiment 2, we categorized students before the experiment both on the basis of their beliefs about beneficiaries' qualifications and on the basis of their levels of racial ambivalence. Drawing on some of the quantitative scaling work on attitudinal ambivalence in general (Kaplan, 1972), we classified students as displaying high, moderate and low ambivalence towards blacks as a group. Using these two analytic variables as the foundation, participants were randomly assigned to experimental conditions. With this improved methodology and with the experimental manipulations remaining the same, we observed a striking pattern of results.

First, we obtained a significant main effect for beliefs about the likely qualifications of beneficiaries of affirmative action. Here we observed that the black confederate was more likely to be chosen to be in a group by white students who believe that beneficiaries will be qualified than by those who believe that beneficiaries will be unqualified.

Second, we obtained an effect which was due to the combined influence of beliefs about the qualifications of beneficiaries and racial ambivalence. Among white students who displayed high ambivalence, there was no differential tendency to choose the black confederate. But among those moderately ambivalent, the black confederate was more likely to be chosen to be in the group by those who believed that beneficiaries would be qualified as opposed to unqualified.

Insert Table 2 about here

Third and finally, the analyses showed a difference in responses that was due to the combined influences of racial ambivalence, beliefs about qualifications and type of group (see Table 2). Here we observed that highly ambivalent subjects did not respond differentially to the black confederate under any conditions. However, those moderately ambivalent showed differential responding on the basis of their beliefs about the qualifications of black students as affirmative action beneficiaries and the type of group. On the one hand, moderately ambivalent students showed no preference difference when considering the black student for membership in a study-group. On the other hand, moderately ambivalent subjects who believed that beneficiaries of affirmative action were likely to be unqualified, showed a strong aversion to having the black student in a study-break group. The latter was true as compared to the responses of subjects who believed that beneficiaries were likely to be qualified and as compared to the responses of subjects in the control groups.

Through experiments 1 and 2, then, we found that the formation of informal groups was influenced by procedure-based beliefs about the extent to which affirmative action leads to the selection of qualified or unqualified black students. We take the results of these experiments to indicate that beliefs about affirmative action play a role in the extent to which black students (and other identifiable, apparent beneficiaries) will be afforded the opportunity to become members of the informal groups that their white student peers "create." That is important because of what that finding may mean about the reasons that black students show such a high rate of withdrawal from predominantly white campuses.

Implications

Affirmative action and Black Student Persistence

A major assumption guiding this work is that the extent to which any student becomes well adjusted to the college environment depends on how well integrated into the socioacademic environment the student becomes. Tinto (1987) indicates that

both persistence in and departure from college are a function of the student's integration into both the academic and social domains of the institution. That integration, according to Tinto, results from feedback the student receives about their academic and social competence through encounters and interactions with other members of the institution. Tinto emphasizes that interactions in the academic and social contexts are linked. This conceptual linking of the academic and social contexts suggests that a set of interactions critical to adjustment to college would be those which mix academic and social content; socioacademic interactions.

Socioacademic interactions will be informal, yet involve academic concerns. Examples include informal "hallway" interactions, coffee break groups, lunch groups; any informal groups in which information about courses and course-work are exchanged.

The results of the research we are reporting here provides strong evidence in support of the claim that predominantly white colleges and universities must not try to avoid or prevent debate of their affirmative action admissions procedures. First, the structural equation modelling of white students' beliefs about affirmative action showed (Barnes Nacoste & Powell, 1991) that those beliefs are determined, in part, by white students' naive conceptions of the policy procedures. Second, the experiments showed that, alone or in conjunction with racial ambivalence, the likelihood that black college students will be "invited" into informal groups can be reduced by beliefs about qualifications of black students as (actual or perceived) beneficiaries of an affirmative action admissions policy

Students will inevitably try to fashion some understanding of the meaning of affirmative action in the context in which they operate. Given that, our results make it clear that it is irresponsible for colleges and universities to be less than forthcoming about how they do affirmative action. We can see that in the way that the experiments show that naive beliefs about affirmative action can influence the formation of informal groups.

The types of groups simulated in our experiments were chosen as the focus because of their direct relation to the socioacademic domain of student to student interactions. These socioacademic groups occur with great frequency in the college environment. Because they are informal, that is unfettered by institutional rules, the dynamics associated with the formation of these groups bears on the social psychological environment to which students must adjust. For that reason, the dynamics of the formation of these groups will affect students' persistence on one side, and on the other side, students' withdrawal.

Through its influence on the likelihood that white students-

the institutional incumbent group- will be willing to include black students in socioacademic interactions, the belief that beneficiaries of affirmative action are likely to be unqualified may affect the integration of black students into the college environment. There are two levels at which this barrier to integration is important. One level is affective or emotional integration. Being kept out of socioacademic interactions with the incumbent group will influence the extent to which black students feel a part of a predominantly white college or university. We have seen that Tinto's model of the forces leading to withdrawal from college suggests that this environmentally induced emotional disconnection should increase the likelihood of withdrawal.

The other level at which the results of the experiments on informal group formation are important is informational integration. In a context where the dominant belief is that beneficiaries of affirmative action are unqualified, black students may be kept out of the flow of information about classwork, the availability of old tests, study strategies, and the like. That could certainly affect the performance of black students relative to white students. This effect on informational integration could be another environmental source of the high withdrawal rate of black students from predominantly white colleges and universities.

What Institutions Can Do

If beliefs about affirmative action cause with any frequency the social dynamics we have discovered, the higher administration of predominantly white colleges and universities must do something. But whatever is to be done, those actions must be guided by an understanding that the cause of the social dynamic is not a policy, but a belief about the procedures of an affirmative action policy.

Keep in mind that the work we have reported here shows that white students who hold the belief that black student beneficiaries of affirmative action will be qualified actually preferred to have a black student in an informal group. So it is not the case that beliefs about affirmative action necessarily have negative social consequences. That means that the extent of any negative effects of beliefs about affirmative action will depend on how those beliefs are distributed on a particular campus. That being the case, it is counterproductive for any college or university administration to suppress discussion of the institution's affirmative action policies. Colleges and universities must outline the procedures of their affirmative action policies so that students may openly debate the issues, and learn where their beliefs have been right and where their beliefs have been wrong.

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Table 1

Experiment 1:
Preference for the target person as a group member.

Beneficiaries are believed to be:

	Qualified	Unqualified
Control Group:	2.6 (32)	2.9 (25)
Study Break Group:	2.3 (21)	2.0 (22)
Study Group:	2.7 (20)	2.8 (22)

N=142

Preferences were on a four point scale; 4=most preferred, 1=least preferred.

Pre-planned contrast to test the differences between the "break" vs "task" conditions and the control group were conducted within each level of beliefs about beneficiary qualifications.

Within the "qualified" condition, none of the contrasts were significant.

Within the "unqualified" condition, preferences were lower in the "break" than the control condition ($F(1,130)=6.94$, $p<.009$), and lower in the "break" than in the "task" condition ($F(1,130)=3.55$, $p<.06$).

Table 2

Experiment 2:
Preference for the target person as a group member.

Racial Ambivalence				
High		Moderate		
Beneficiaries are:		Beneficiaries are:		
Qualified	Unqualified	Qualified	Unqualified	
Study Break Group:	2.7 (11)	2.2 (10)	3.2 (11)	2.3 (9)
Study Group:	2.9 (10)	2.9 (11)	3.3 (10)	2.8 (10)
Control Group:	3.0 (12)		3.0 (12)	

N=106

Preferences were on a four point scale; 4=most preferred, 1=least preferred.

Pre-planned contrast were conducted. As expected, subjects who believed that beneficiaries of affirmative action are ds), The question of discrimination: Racial ineq

Table 1

Experiment 1:
Preference for the target person as a group member.

Beneficiaries are believed to be:		
	Qualified	Unqualified
Control Group:	2.6 (32)	2.9 (25)
Study Break Group:	2.3 (21)	2.0 (22)
Study Group:	2.7 (20)	2.8 (22)

N=142

Preferences were on a four point scale; 4=most preferred, 1=least preferred.

Pre-planned contrast were conducted within each level of beliefs about beneficiary qualifications in order to test the differences between the "study-break" vs "study-group" conditions and the control group.

Within the "qualified" condition, none of the contrasts were significant.

Within the "unqualified" condition, preferences were lower in the "study-break group" than the control condition ($F(1,130)=6.94$, $p<.009$), and lower in the "study-break group" than in the "study group" condition ($F(1,130)=3.55$, $p<.06$).

Table 2

Experiment 2:
Preference for the target person as a group member.

		Racial Ambivalence			
		High		Moderate	
		Beneficiaries are:		Beneficiaries are:	
		Qualified	Unqualified	Qualified	Unqualified
Study Break Group:		2.7 (11)	2.2 (10)	3.2 (11)	2.3 (9)
Study Group:		2.9 (10)	2.9 (11)	3.3 (10)	2.8 (10)
Control Group:		3.0 (12)		3.0 (12)	

N=106

Preferences were on a four point scale; 4=most preferred, 1=least preferred.

Pre-planned contrast were conducted. As expected, subjects who believed that beneficiaries of affirmative action are likely to be unqualified ($M=2.6$) as opposed to qualified ($M=3.0$) showed less preference for the black target person ($F(1,96)=3.96$, $p<.05$). Also, as expected, within the high ambivalence group none of the contrasts were significant. Again, as expected, within the moderate ambivalence group, those choosing for a "study-break" group and who believed that affirmative action beneficiaries are unqualified as opposed to qualified, showed much less preference for the black target person ($F(1,96)=4.88$, $p<.03$). No such pattern emerged for those choosing for a "study group."